

When Theodore Roosevelt visited Newfield

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Former President Theodore Roosevelt's 1910 visit to Newfield is commemorated with a historical marker. (Photo: Provided photo)

Without a doubt, the most recognized event in Newfield's history has to be Theodore Roosevelt's visit on Oct. 24, 1910.

The fact that there is photographic evidence of the occasion probably has a lot to do with the event's fame. Anyone who has lived in the town for a few years or more has likely seen the photos of the former president gracing the balcony of the old Newfield Hotel.

For the majority of residents, that is the extent of their knowledge of Roosevelt's visit. There is, however, more to the story.

Before coming to the village to give his speech, the retired president motored his way through Trumbulls Corners, Connecticut Hill and Pony Hollow, where he visited a couple of family farms. Then, after his speech was given at the hotel, he and his entourage of congressmen and reporters traveled with the townsfolk up to Picnic Corners for a meal.

Picnic Corners, for those who don't know, is today at the intersection of Vankirk Road and Irish Hill Road. Back then, though, it was nearly a four-corner intersection, as Starks Road used to meet Vankirk just a few yards east of the Vankirk/Irish Hill intersection.

Throughout much of his time in Newfield, Roosevelt seemed to have enjoyed himself and was apparently in a very playful and quick-witted mood. At Picnic Corners, it was reported that he spent around an hour with the locals, "eating and fooling around," and that any "passerby would never have known that an ex-president was in that luncheon."

Being the outdoors lover that he was, the former president must have surely enjoyed the beautiful and hilly countryside that our town has to offer, as well as the informality of the occasion. Reminiscent of current affairs, an Ithaca newspaper even told of him poking a little fun at the media and his political opponents. As he was about to down a glass of water before moving along, he was reported as saying, "Now I suppose they will say I stopped at a picnic and drank heavily."

The site of Picnic Corners has been mostly reclaimed by the forest, and a few new houses have popped up along the roads in the area. A fine grass can still be seen growing at the old picnic grounds, under the trees on the southeast corner of the intersection, though — a lingering piece of the past that reminds the modern Newfielder that the intersection was once much more open, and inviting for the townsfolk to come park their buggies or wagons. Surely, many a picnic was enjoyed there, spread out over a homespun blanket on a sunny day.

In summer of 2016, a brand new, blue and yellow New York state historical marker was erected at the old intersection to commemorate Roosevelt's brief but memorable time there. The sign was paid for with funds from a grant, awarded to the town by the William G. Pomeroy Foundation.

Matt Watros Jr. is a lifelong resident of Newfield, a Marine veteran who served in Iraq, a firefighter/EMT for the Ithaca Fire Department, and a former Civil War re-enactor.